

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

June 12, 2018

The Honorable Ralph DLG Torres
Governor
Commonwealth of the
Northern Mariana Islands
Caller Box 10007
Saipan, MP 96950

Dear Governor Torres:

In the interest of full transparency, I recently released data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, showing that the Commonwealth government is not spending millions of dollars that Congress appropriated to be used for food assistance. I was roundly criticized by your administration in the newspapers and on social media for making this information available to the public.

But transparency produced results. Your administration announced a significant increase in food stamp benefits that went into effect on May 1. By taking this action, you fulfilled one of my long-term goals: SNAP parity. Benefits for families on Saipan are now the same as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits on Guam. And benefits for families on Rota, the Northern Islands, and Tinian are now higher than SNAP. So, I want to thank you; and, I am sure, the 2,600 households now receiving more aid, also, thank you.

Yet, even this much appreciated increase in assistance for Marianas families will leave millions of dollars of federal funding unused. The Agriculture Department projects that by the end of 2021 the Commonwealth government will still be holding \$10,135,655 of the \$30,500,000 that I put into the 2014 Agricultural Act, Public Law 113-79. And the Commonwealth will have another \$7,309,970 unused of the annual \$12,148,000 block grant that Congress appropriates. The total expected carry-over at the end of 2021 is \$20,443,758.

The way to use these funds is to make more families eligible for assistance. By my calculation, based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture data, you could add 2,000 more Marianas households to those already receiving food aid, if you used all the Agricultural Act money you have available now and the block grant Congress appropriates annually.

Who am I talking about? These are households earning more than the current maximum income for a family of four, \$17,412 per year, and less than \$25,000. They are families earning minimum wage, on fixed incomes, and retirees. And it is possible you could include families at even higher income levels.

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Even making 2,000 more households eligible, however, would still not bring the Marianas to full parity with Guam and the rest of the United States. The 2016 report, Assessing the Feasibility of Implementing SNAP in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands—also funded by Public Law 113-79—estimated that applying the income thresholds used for SNAP nationwide would result in over 4,000 more Marianas households being eligible for assistance. Under that scenario four-person households with income up to \$32,000 could be eligible for assistance.

That remains my goal: to have every family in the Marianas that would qualify under SNAP income guidelines eligible to receive SNAP level benefits—either by including the Marianas in SNAP or by securing sufficient annual funding to give the Marianas parity.

And now could be the time to get there. A new farm bill is working its way through the current Congress, the same legislative vehicle I used in 2014 to get the money you have now used to raise benefits. This time, I want complete SNAP parity or inclusion. But it is difficult for me to make the case, when the Commonwealth government is unwilling to use the millions of dollars Congress has already made available to you.

Just as I was criticized by your administration for being transparent about this information, I was also rebuked for not consulting with you. So, I write today in the spirit of consultation. You have the authority to give thousands of our people more to eat. You have the ability to inject millions of federal dollars into our economy to the benefit of shippers, wholesalers, and retailers of imported food. You could help our local farmers and fishers, who are supposed to receive 30% of all that food stamp spending.

I have made federal funding available. I am working to get more. I urge you to use this money—now—to help our economy and to help more families put food on the table.

Sincerely,



GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLAN
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Victor B. Hocog, Lt. Governor
The Honorable Arnold I. Palacios, President of the Senate
The Honorable Rafael S. Demapan, Speaker of the House